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USDA'S REPORT TO CONSUMERS

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CHEWING THE FAT

About Fats In Food And Diet. Jack and Mrs. Spratt were in trouble nutritionally. Jack, on a no-fat diet, ran the risk of deficiencies of vitamins A, D, E, and K and probably didn't enjoy his meals much without the flavor that fats add to foods -- unfortunate because he had to eat a larger volume of "lean" to satisfy his appetite and keep up his energy. On the other hand, Mrs. Spratt, eating only fat, had her problems. She undoubtedly was overweight and possibly had above normal amounts of lipids in her blood. A high level of lipids, which include triglycerides and cholesterol, is associated with atherosclerosis, an arterial disease responsible for most coronary heart disease and a major culprit in cerebral thrombosis (stroke). Scientific opinion varies as to the specific role fat plays in the risk of atherosclerosis. However, there is consensus about the importance to health at every age of the several factors including diet which affect development of the disease. USDA's Agricultural Research Service recently prepared a booklet, "Fats in Food and Diet," which can help answer some of the nonmedical questions about the effects of dietary fat on health. The booklet discusses the importance of a balanced diet; kinds of fat and fatty acids; cholesterol; and some of the fat facts uncovered by research. Tables list fat content and major fatty acid composition as well as cholesterol content of some foods. Copies of "Fats In Food And Diet," (AIB 361) are available for 25¢ each from Superintendent of Documents, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

NEWS FROM THE VEGETABLE ROWS

Varieties With More Than Before. USDA scientists have discovered some new vegetable lines with more nutritional value than their present-day relatives: carrots with 20 percent more carotene; potatoes with higher protein content; cabbage with 2.2 times more vitamin C.



SPRING FOOD PREVIEW

Comes spring, the season for early lamb, fresh strawberries, and abundant eggs. As the days warm, the early vegetable crops appear, brightening the springtime food fare. The first arrivals include sweet corn, asparagus, white and yellow onions, peppers, and cucumbers--and in late spring, cantaloupes and watermelons.

Rising food prices for many items will also be evident as you shop this spring. Price increases during April-June, however, may not equal those of January-March, when food prices at supermarkets and restaurants averaged about 5 percent higher than last fall. Prices are up because:

Meat supplies are tightening again, following some relief last fall.

Dairy products are costing more due to heavy demand for dairy products and a downturn in milk supplies.

Prices of processed fruits and vegetables, or those drawn from cold storage, tend to rise this time of year, and supplies are generally below those of recent years.

Spiralling fuel costs and general inflation in the economy are making the business of processing, shipping, and selling food more expensive.

Of course, there are exceptions to the pattern of rising prices. There are some foods whose prices are steady, and some cost less than in months past.

Though egg prices in January were nearly as high as last summer, poultrymen are expanding flocks, and prices will ease--especially after Easter. Egg prices have dropped sharply since January and by mid-year you may pay 20 cents less for a dozen eggs than you did at the first of the year.

Look for more chicken, and turkey--and a rising demand for them--as beef and pork supplies tighten in the spring. A whole fryer may cost you around 60 cents a pound this spring, about the same as a year earlier, but less than you paid in August and September. Turkey prices, down slightly from the peaks of last summer and fall, will ease further in the spring. Prices may average around the 65-70 cents a pound of last spring.

There may be some further price increases for dairy products this spring, especially for milk. Currently, dairy product prices stand a fourth higher than in early 1973. While consumer demand has increased for dairy products as good protein sources, milk production has been slipping and prices rising. Even a doubling of imports didn't help much last year. But the big price increases are probably behind us. A recent boost in U.S. cheese output, plus more imports, may stabilize prices of American cheese and cheese foods this spring. And butter prices lately have dropped back a little.

Look for retail meat prices to continue as high or higher this spring than their peaks of last August or September. Retail beef prices, averaging all cuts nationwide, peaked at \$1.45 per pound last summer; pork cuts were \$1.32. Though pork and beef prices declined quite a bit last fall, they climbed back up in January.

Retail lamb and veal prices have stayed at about the same levels of last summer.

Cheaper meat cuts are bearing the brunt of current price increases in meats. This was also true last year as price rises for hamburger and chuck outdistanced those for steak. Some of the largest hikes per pound hit franks, canned and fresh ham, bacon, pork sausage, and luncheon meats.

The point is: Shifts in how the shopper spends his food dollar affects food prices. The shifting consumer demand from costlier to cheaper cuts of meats pushed up the prices of the cheaper cuts further.

With meat prices high, sales of soy-meat blends have increased sharply. The "blend-burger"--hamburger and textured soy protein--usually retails 15-20 cents less per pound than pure hamburger.

By planting more acres for winter harvest, growers have managed to keep retail fresh vegetable prices comparable to those of last winter. In fact, lettuce, carrots, celery, and onions have been priced lower than last winter. Both fresh and processed mushrooms are plentiful. In general, many fresh vegetables should continue in good supply this spring, helping to minimize price increases.

Not so for potatoes and beans, though. After a smallish potato crop last fall, supplies are tight. Processors demand increasing quantities of potatoes, and fresh potato prices have risen this winter to record levels.

Last fall's disappointing harvest of dry beans has been followed by huge demands at home and overseas because of rising prices for protein-rich foods. Consumers are paying double to triple prices of a year ago.

Rice prices have also doubled during this time. Much U.S. rice is going to stem shortages occurring in many less-developed countries.

Consumer demand for canned and frozen vegetables has been very strong. Canned vegetables are in tight supply, and prices will continue increasing this spring.

Frozen snap beans are in good supply following a big crop last fall. There is plenty of frozen corn--more of it on the cob this year--and prices have been fairly steady. Frozen spinach is plentiful. And there are more frozen peas but they are priced a little higher than in 1973. Frozen french fries also cost a little more than last year.

Fruit prices will be generally higher this spring. Farm prices are higher and processing and retailing costs are up. Even so, some items cost only moderately more than last year. For example, there are large supplies of orange juice, both frozen concentrate and fresh chilled. Prices are near those of a year ago. There are lots of bananas, priced about the same as in 1973.

There will also be a large crop of Navel oranges, but fewer Valencias. And there will be much more noncitrus fruit on hand compared with last spring, though prices will be up moderately. With a huge harvest of Red Delicious last fall, more apples are on the counters. Raisins and dried fruit, scarce just a year ago, have reappeared on the shelves, and harvests of walnuts, pecans, and filberts proved much more generous last fall. Grocery store freezers are better stocked, too, with frozen blueberries, peaches, and strawberries leading off the list.

On the other hand, you'll note somewhat higher prices for canned noncitrus fruit. From this group, only purple plums and apricots aren't considered in very short supply.

On the bread scene: The pound loaf of bread, subject of monthly national price surveys, cost 32 cents in January, up 7 cents from a year ago. About 3-1/2 cents of the 7-cent increase came from higher farm prices for ingredients, mostly the 10 ounces of wheat flour a pound loaf contains. Farmers currently get about 8 cents of the 32-cent price. Flour milling, baking, wrapping, and retailing bread account for the remaining 24 cents.

You can expect some further bread price increases during 1974. Prices will rise, mainly as the bakers and retailers cope with higher fuel costs, wage increases, and other inflationary factors. Wheat prices, which influence the farmer's share, are expected to drop some after midyear.

ENERGY CONSERVATION

The "Broken e". USDA is using a star-studded "broken e" symbol, indicating a break in energy, in its energy conservation campaign. The education-information campaign is aimed at both consumer and farmer, alerting them to energy-conserving steps they can take. You will see the symbol appearing alone, in slogans, on publications, and on auto stickers, to certify that the user is aware of the energy problem and is cooperating in conservation activities -- which can range from car tuneups for more fuel efficiency to keeping the thermostat turned down.

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